UNITED
NATIONS

E

Economic and Social Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.17/1996/12
26 February 1996

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
Fourth session
18 April-3 May 1996

Role of major groups in implementation of Agenda 21

Report of the Secretary-General

SUMMARY

This report is based on a more detailed background paper analysing the role and contributions of major groups to Agenda 21, in the 1995-1996 period. Major groups relate to the role of nine non-governmental sectors that Agenda 21 recognizes in section III, chapters 23-32.

The analysis is based on inputs received (from 100 organizations of major groups from around the world, from reports of United Nations agencies and from responses of Governments to the national guidelines) as well as on research through publications and the electronic media.

The analysis found that major groups continue to demonstrate their commitments to Agenda 21 follow-up through dissemination, collection and analysis of information, through networking and linking various other international processes to that of the Commission on Sustainable Development, through technical assistance, and through participation in and organization of various programmes that help actors from governmental, non-governmental and intergovernmental forums to develop partnerships, build consensus and identify common priorities.

The present report includes some conclusions based on the analysis and a set of recommendations for future action, particularly in the context of the 1997 review of Agenda 21 by the General Assembly in a special session.

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INTRODUCTION

1. This report is prepared in response to the requests of the Commission on Sustainable Development for annual reports on the role and contribution of major groups in the implementation of Agenda 21, monitoring the progress achieved at national, regional and international levels.

2. The primary basis for annual reports on the role of major groups is the multi-year thematic programme of work of the Commission, adopted at the first substantive session (E/CN.17/1993/3/Add.1). Subsequent sessions of the Commission further elaborated the content of the annual report on major groups as well as on the modalities with which major groups contribute to the Commission's work.

3. The present report contains the main conclusions and the recommendations for future action as identified in the background paper on the role of major groups. The background paper is a detailed review and analysis of inputs received from over 100 major group organizations, responses of Governments to the national information guidelines for 1996 and information that was made available by United Nations and non-United Nations international organizations.

4. Two additional sets of background materials on major groups are also available to the fourth session of the Commission. One is a set of 14 case-studies on sustainable development initiatives of business and industry and workers and trade unions. These case-studies are among the outcomes of the "Day of the Workplace" process. The other is a set of materials generated through the first Youth Inter-sessional. Further detail on the processes and partnerships that enabled the production of these additional materials is available in the background paper.

I. MAIN TRENDS

5. Major groups continue to show a sustained commitment to the goals of Agenda 21 at the local, national, subregional, regional and international levels. The inputs received for the fourth session of the Commission (103 organizations) were more than twice those received for the third session (41 organizations). These inputs indicated that major groups continued to open new avenues for dialogue, collaboration and cooperation through participation, wherever possible, in monitoring and implementation activities of Agenda 21. Major groups continue to be active in the Commission itself, including in its inter-sessional meetings. The special major group-related events prepared for the Commission's meetings appear to have a positive effect regarding a more direct involvement by selected actors from among a major group sector.

6. Country reports indicate that there are continuing efforts to increase major group participation in national decision-making processes, and the national coordination mechanisms. Most countries find the contributions from local, national, regional and international major groups useful to their national efforts. There are also indications that some countries are planning to include major groups in their national delegations to the Commission.

7. International organizations appear to focus more closely on the role of non-governmental actors in their activities in general. Inputs and exchange with international organizations show various levels of efforts to develop strategies, frameworks and guidelines involving non-governmental major groups as a way to increase overall cooperation and collaboration.

II. MAIN OBSTACLES

8. Several obstacles continue to exist. Financing (for projects as well as for training and institutional capacity-building) remains an obstacle. Current participatory arrangements are found to be lacking in the face of a growing need to share ideas, collaborate on projects and increase overall commitment of all actors at all levels. Demands for more predictable, somewhat formalized, reliable and equal partnership opportunities in international and national decision-making bodies are gaining the support of major group organizations of all sizes and geographical locations.

9. These demands appear to be a healthy outcome of the Agenda 21 implementation process itself. At present, Agenda 21 implementation and monitoring efforts focus less on general sustainable development issues and more on their specific aspects. Major group actors feel they can make significant contributions with greater impact on the increasingly specialized discussions if they could participate under more predictable, tangible and somewhat formalized modalities. Further action to enhance national level participation is desirable given that Agenda 21 objectives require concerted implementation effort at the international, regional, national and local levels. The catalytic role of large international non-governmental organizations, as well as regional and international multilateral actors appear to become increasingly important in brokering strategic partnerships between the Governments and major groups.

10. At the international level, there appears to be further need to increase the overall transparency and direct participation opportunities for major groups. A particular area in this context, is the growing demands from major group organizations for greater openness, transparency and participation in the Bretton Woods institutions. While many major group organizations recognize the recent efforts made by such bodies as the World Bank to increase participation of the non-governmental sectors in project design and implementation processes, they also call for further efforts along these lines by other multilateral financial and trade organizations.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTION

11. Recommendations related to major groups that may be adopted by the Commission at its fourth session have a particular significance given the upcoming first five-year review of Agenda 21 follow-up by the General Assembly in a special session in June 1997.

12. The analysis of inputs on major groups indicate at least three areas in which further work needs to be done to encourage, enhance and enable the type of participation that Agenda 21 envisions. These areas include: information

collection and dissemination, participatory arrangements, and programming support.

A. Information dissemination and collection

13. Information is essential to effective participation. Collection of useful information and its dissemination in a timely and accessible manner increases transparency and the element of trust in an international effort. In the 1990s, the most important aspect of information is not its quantity but rather its quality, or how useful and relevant it is to the user. Some areas of work that can increase information collection and dissemination are detailed below.

(a) Further development of simple and accessible information collection tools that assist local people to take a more active role in assessing local environmental conditions

14. Major group organizations, particularly those at the local levels, have less access to various information databases and methods, including monitoring tools. Capacity in these areas helps a community to (a) develop a baseline for its local environmental problems and development needs, and establish its priorities and strategies accordingly; and (b) share its local monitoring results with others around the world to assess overall progress. Thus, developing simplified information collection methods and tools and disseminating them widely among local major groups will help both the local decisions and those at the national, regional and international levels. There is a significant role in this area for international organizations, including United Nations agencies and large non-governmental organizations, that have developed tools and kits for monitoring local conditions, and have the network through which these tools/kits can be more widely disseminated.

(b) More comprehensive reporting on Agenda 21 to the Commission

15. The overall monitoring of Agenda 21 will produce more substantial results as reporting moves closer to achieving comprehensiveness. This is not only relevant to reporting by countries and intergovernmental bodies but equally to information provided by major group actors. Although some special programming efforts, such as the Day of the Workplace or the Day of Local Authorities have increased knowledge of the respective major group sectors' activities, the existing knowledge is far from giving a comprehensive picture. The reporting process could particularly benefit from more information made available by business and industry, indigenous people, women and farmers.

(c) Database development

16. Many major group organizations as well as other governmental and intergovernmental actors in Agenda 21 follow-up are increasingly requesting information on the role and participation of major groups. Although a preliminary database in this direction has been created, as requested by the Commission in 1995, further efforts need to be made. A potential exists in reviewing current databases, particularly among the major group communities, and exploring how they could be linked. Some non-governmental organizations have an

interest in collaborating on this issue especially if the efforts aim to make the database electronically available for all concerned parties. This initiative could also be useful in collecting information on alternative approaches and methods developed by major groups on sustainable development and making this set of data available to all others to benefit and build upon. Such a review could include collecting and assessing the usefulness of alternatives in changing consumption and production patterns, human settlements, sustainable agriculture and conservation of biodiversity.

B. Participatory arrangements

17. As the work of the Commission progresses, there is increasing focus by major groups on specific issues through institutional mechanisms, such as the Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Panel on Forests, or through formulation of work programmes, such as those on transfer of technology or on sustainable development indicators. As the sustainable development discussions get deeper into specific areas, major group actors will need better participatory arrangements to allow for their optimal inputs.

18. The efforts of countries to include major group representatives in their national delegations are positive and need to continue, particularly in the context of the 1997 review process. Further initiatives to include major groups in national delegations should be emphasized. A number of other suggestions in this context are described below.

(a) Establishing predictable, transparent and open participation structures at the national level

19. Global objectives need the fertile ground of local and national commitment to flourish. This is stressed in Agenda 21, which puts local and national efforts at the core of the follow-up process. The existing examples of national efforts to include major groups in national sustainable development discussions as well as in related project design and implementation are positive steps. Similarly, the efforts of major groups, particularly those of local authorities, to involve local communities and organizations in sustainable development decision-making are welcome developments. However, many of these efforts remain as stand-alone examples of best-practice rather than a globally shared strategy that stresses consensus-building and dialogue with all the relevant actors. Further and sustained efforts in this area are essential.

20. Several tangible steps could be discerned. One area that may deserve attention is the forming of partnerships between national Governments and local authorities. Such partnerships could explore how broad-based consultative mechanisms at the local and national levels could further the common goals of sustainability. Another area of focus could be additional efforts to raise the awareness of the general population at the local and national levels about the existing sustainable development institutions and the rules for broad public participation in them. In many cases, major groups, particularly the local and grass-roots organizations, do not yet seem to know that national or local participatory mechanisms exist and that they can participate in these processes. Finding openings for exchange of views and consultative decision-making needs to

be a shared responsibility rather than a challenge that belongs to major group or governmental actors alone. There is an overall need to overcome established perceptions and prejudices by focusing on common objectives.

(b) Allowing for more direct and effective participation at the international level

21. A number of positive participatory precedents have been set in the Commission as well as other forums. These include allowing non-governmental participants to take a more active part in the negotiations, to include non-governmental actors in informal groups and to make room for non-governmental views in preparing proposals, reports and other documents. For example, during the last two years, some reporting exercises for the Commission involved more regular and direct contacts with non-governmental organizations and other major groups through informal e-mail lists or other methods. At the Commission, non-governmental organizations and major groups have been enjoying a relatively more open and transparent participatory process.

22. Similarly, the discussions at the first Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Panel on Forests allowed for non-governmental statements and inputs during the negotiations. Some working groups of the meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity were chaired by a participant from a non-governmental organization. The preparatory conferences for Habitat II and the participation of local authorities and other relevant actors have illustrated the dynamism that partnerships bring to the Conference process. The rules of procedure for Habitat II, in particular rule 61, provide a special status for the participation of local authorities in the Conference, its main committees and, as appropriate, any other committee.

23. Some of these precedents may need to be formalized, particularly given that these precedents appear to have increased the trust, collaboration and cooperation between non-governmental and governmental actors at the international level. It may be useful to collect more information on such precedents and explore, with the year 1997 in mind, how these experiences can be put to use in the post-1997 period of sustainable development efforts.

(c) Exploring ways to harmonize participation rules at the international level

24. The United Nations agencies and other regional and international intergovernmental bodies have taken steps to increase their collaboration and cooperation with major groups under the sustainable development issues within their fields of competence. While these efforts have been welcomed by major groups, the diversity among the participation rules and requirements adopted by the various organizations continue to be confusing and time consuming.

25. Non-governmental organizations and major groups are often oriented to themes rather than institutional processes. The latter usually have different participatory arrangements for non-governmental actors. Although the difference may make sense for institutional reasons, it creates unnecessary confusion and loss of time for the major groups, when they try to deal with the arrangements, or they create a barrier to sharing of thematic experiences between major groups and international organizations.

26. An initiative in this context could be a review of arrangements for participation, including the various frameworks, guidelines and strategies developed by international bodies, in an informal committee composed of representatives from international bodies and major groups working on sustainable development issues. Such a committee could submit the results of its deliberations to the Commission at its fifth session.

(d) Preserving the baseline of non-governmental participation in the Commission itself and expanding the participatory basis

27. A total of 570 non-governmental organizations, from among the 1,400 who participated in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), were placed on the roster after the Conference and are presently on the roster list of organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council as a result of Council decision E/1993/215, paragraph 2 (c). These organizations have been a valuable part of the work of the Commission, including its various inter-sessional activities and have been instrumental in maintaining sustainable development high on the local, national and international agendas. It is important to preserve this baseline of active non-governmental participants in the Commission. An action in this direction could be efforts to ensure that they are confirmed as having regular roster status to the Council.

28. There are also a growing number of non-governmental organizations and other major group organizations that wish to become an active part of the Commission and related processes. Many, since UNCED, have reformulated their priorities and programmes to increase their organizational capacity to make a contribution to the global sustainable development efforts. Enabling their participation in the international forums is an effective way to increase awareness of sustainable development and Agenda 21 around the world and to gain further momentum for the follow-up process. Efforts that facilitate the entry of new organizations into the fold of active major groups in the Commission and other related international forums will be useful and should be considered.

C. Programme support

29. Inputs from major groups indicate the existence of a great deal of major group-based programming to implement the activities of Agenda 21. Some examples, including various collaborative technical assistance programmes, are reported above, as well as in other background papers on major groups prepared for the previous sessions of the Commission. These ongoing activities will flourish and multiply if they are consistently supported and encouraged. Some activities that could help this process are shown below.

(a) Support for networking

30. Major group organizations are continuing their networking efforts in order to increase exchanges between major groups on thematic areas of Agenda 21 follow-up. These networks create a fertile ground for consensus-building at the national, regional and international levels, as well as increase awareness of the UNCED follow-up process among the non-governmental actors. The networking efforts need sustained support from Governments and international organizations

in order that the networks may continue with their valuable contributions to the building of consensus and setting of common priorities. The type of support that the networks need ranges from basic equipment to finance and training.

(b) Supporting and catalysing special major group events in the Commission

31. The contributions of the Day of Local Authorities, the Day of the Workplace and the Youth Inter-sessional have been very positive in terms of creating well-focused partnerships in the preparation processes and also in terms of increasing overall awareness about the initiatives generated by actors within specific major group sectors. The positive experience gained from these events were in part due to the equal partnerships catalysed with the major group partners and their networks. These experiences and modalities of working with major groups may be useful to build on and disseminate in other arenas. Among other things, the experiences can be useful guidance for the special events that may be organized in the context of the 1997 review.

(c) Supporting and encouraging involvement of all major groups in the 1997 review

32. Major group actors have shown that they are fully committed to the goals of Agenda 21. The level of ownership so far demonstrated needs to be further encouraged and supported to enable a five-year review in which major group actors can contribute to its success as they did to the success of UNCED. Direct major group participation in the preparations for the 1997 review is even more salient, as this is a review of implementation activities in which major groups have played a significant role.

33. Some major groups have already developed preliminary plans to make a special contribution to the 1997 review. Among these are the global survey of local Agenda 21 initiatives planned by local authorities; and an expanded reporting on young people's views on Agenda 21 implementation planned by a number of youth organizations. Similar initiatives from other major groups should be invited and encouraged. Among such special events for the 1997 review, it would be desirable to see programmes that focus on the role of indigenous people, farmers and women. Although individual organizations and actors from these groups have been active in the process their coordinated and collective views and experiences, including best-practice or partnership examples, may need to be brought to the Commission and to the 1997 process.